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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000886

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DEPT. FOR S, D, P, NEA AND EUR;
OSD FOR SECDEF, DEPSECDEF WOLFOWITZ AND USDP FEITH;
NSC FOR DAN FRIED;
CENTCOM FOR GEN. ABIZAID;
BAGHDAD FOR AMB. NEGROPONTE AND GEN. CASEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [IT](#) [IZ](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AFGHANISTAN](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ/ITALY: BERLUSCONI SAYS ITALY TO BEGIN
REDUCING TROOP PRESENCE IN SEPTEMBER - DEFMIN REASSURES
AMBASSADOR THAT IN REALITY NO CHANGES PLANNED

Classified By: Ambassador Mel Sembler, reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) On March 15, PM Berlusconi said in a TV interview that Italy would begin reducing its troop presence in Iraq in September, conditions permitting. He did not refer to any Italian draw-down in his presentations to the Senate last week and his statement caught Italian officials off-guard. DefMin Martino called Amb. Sembler the morning of March 16 at the request of PM Berlusconi. Martino said Berlusconi had asked him to "assure our American friends that nothing has changed." The PM's words, according to Martino, were "just conjecture" on how the situation will develop. Italy intends to stay in Iraq until the situation stabilizes.

2. (C) Martino added his own comment that the PM's statement was aimed at making an impact on Italian public opinion in anticipation of Italy's April 3-4 regional elections. When Amb. Sembler asked Martino if he intended to speak to the Secretary of Defense about the PM's remarks, Martino replied

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that he expected SecDef would be calling him.

3. (C) Comment: In Embassy's view, yesterday's USG statements from the White House, the Department of State, and the Pentagon were right on the mark, emphasizing the important role Italy has played in Iraq and the PM's commitment to consult with allies and to only take action based on the situation on the ground. Embassy will send more detailed analysis of Berlusconi's statements later today. End Comment

4. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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2005ROME00886 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL